A F/Oxymoron: Women, Creativity and the Suburbs?

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Abstract: Donald Horne famously said "Australia was born urban and quickly grew suburban" (1964), an observation that carries a weight of assumptions about suburban living. Historically, the Australian suburbs have been regarded as places of retreat, family life and female activity, and subsequently where not much of interest happens. By contrast, a city's central areas are seen as more dynamic spaces and with recent creative city thinking and planning, as potential powerhouses of innovation and creativity. This article challenges assumptions about suburban living as passive places of retreat, through an examination of women in the creative workforce who are living and working in the suburbs. It draws on historical accounts of creative suburban activity and a research project which mapped and investigated the experience of creative workers in the outer suburbs of Brisbane and Melbourne. The study finds that there is much creative work occurring in suburban localities, but this is not as unusual as might be expected.

Introduction

Culture and creativity have a long association with cities. The location of the world's major cultural institutions, cities are also regarded as places that provide the conditions in which creative human endeavour can flourish and excel. Capitalising on the idea that city's are powerhouses of creativity and innovation, 'creative city' policies began to appear towards the end of the twentieth century throughout many western cities. Analysis around creative cities has focussed on identifying how the clustering of the creative workforce in densely populated centres produces innovative cultural *milieux* (Evans 2009; Florida 2002), resulting in a plethora of benefits for urban economies and the cultural life of post-industrial cities. From hipster enclaves with funky cafes, bars, designer boutiques and galleries to large-scale cultural complexes, urban regeneration patterns are similar the world over. In creative city discourse, cities are places that attract creative talent and tourism, and fuel economic growth.

Yet a geographical focus on the urban core (defined as within five kilometres from the centre), overlooks what other creative and cultural activity is happening in suburban and peri-urban areas. Australian cities are experiencing rapid demographic, structural and social change reconfiguring how people live and work in our cities and suburbs. This is made evident by recent research in Australia that identified most of the Melbourne workforce live and work in the suburbs; 74% of people work in mid to outer suburban localities (Davies 2009).

Indeed, the suburbs have changed significantly since their establishment: once discrete geographical and gendered zones of distinct activity, now many suburbs and inner cities share a similar range of services, amenities and infrastructure. Suburban demographies have changed radically, a change brought about by the intensification of mobility and migration and, not least, the entry of women into the workforce in significant numbers.

Women's changing roles since the early 1970s are a substantial contribution to social change which is mapped out across Australian cities and suburbs. No longer bastions of domestic and female activity, many suburbs are major service centres, with hospitals and government departments and where there are more job opportunities than in the central business district (Gibson *et al.* 2006; Davies 2009).

This article investigates the creative suburban workforce: that is, people who live and work in the suburbs in a creative or cultural capacity. It is concerned with women in particular, who have been historically confined to the suburbs by the gendered division of labour, but whose changing roles have resulted in profound social change. This is reflected in distinct shifts in employment and other entrepreneurial opportunities. The research presented in the article is based on the large-scale, qualitative project *Creative Suburbia* that mapped and investigated the experience of creative workers working and living in six outer suburbs of two Australian cities, Brisbane and Melbourne.

The Context: Australian Suburbanism

Anti-suburban attitudes have been dominant in Australian intellectual and cultural discourse for many years, represented in literature and popular culture (Kinnane 1998). Despite this, most Australians live, and increasingly work, in the suburbs. Urban historian Graeme Davison writes that 'Australia was born urban and quickly grew suburban' (Davison 1994: 98), identifying the degree to which a suburban ethos defined Australian colonial settlement from the late eighteenth century onwards. For Davison, the conditions in which the suburbs were established – removing people from overcrowding and unhygienic slum conditions – meant that suburban development was based on a 'logic of avoidance' that attempted to banish anything that seemed dangerous and offensive (1994: 110). This logic of avoidance is a familiar and enduring trope even today, as the distinctions between urban and suburban life

become less apparent. The suburbs as dull places where either not much happens or malevolence occurs, is a dominant theme in literature, film and television. Popular culture is replete with satirical depictions of the suburbs, and reach their apotheosis in Barry Humphries' 1970s creation of Dame Edna Everage, housewife superstar. Dame Edna is representative of all that is wrong with suburban life: conformity, materialism and the 'trivial' occupations of domesticity. More recently, ABC television's *Kath and Kim* (2002-2007) animates this theme, a quasi-affectionate parody of suburban values in which the minutiae of life and consumer fads is satirised.

It is hard to ignore the implicit or explicit gendered nature of suburban critique and satire given that the suburbs are traditionally the locus of female activity and identity. Novelist Patrick White puts this antipathy more bluntly when he describes the mythical suburb of Sarsaparilla as 'a geographical hell ruled by female demons' (cited in Duruz 1994). As Tim Rowse observes, the 'negative image of suburbia is equally a negative image of women' (cited in Fiske *et al.* 1987: 10). Similarly Louise Johnson argues that lampooning the suburbs 'not only privileged inner city living but also the worlds of men – paid work, the public arena and production – over the reproductive sphere of women' (2012: 219). Indeed, urban historian Lewis Mumford in his seminal book *The City in History* (1961) claimed that suburban life was 'not merely a child centred environment: it is based on a childish view of the world which is sacrificed to the pleasure principle' (1961: 563). Mumford's psychoanalytic reference, to pursue the theme, reveals the ways in which suburban life calls up anxieties about the feminine, and in which derision and satire are strategies to neutralise the threat.

Historically maligned as non-productive places, an antipathy to suburban life has contributed to its oversight in creative city thinking and analysis. Yet several key developments occurring towards the end of the twentieth century have contributed to the reformation of suburban living, if not the perception. Aside from population movements

mentioned earlier, technology, with the advent of the internet, has had a significant impact on everyday life. While technology has not rendered 'place' irrelevant as some scholars predicted (see Mitchell 1996), it has produced a range of new opportunities for cultural and creative production, consumption and communication. It has also enabled flexible working arrangements, entrepreneurial activity and a range of online marketing opportunities. Many of these opportunities have benefitted and been exploited by women, particularly those who are combining family and work responsibilities. Technological development, urban rezoning and change in gender roles underscore the contribution that women are making to the reconfigured twenty-first-century suburbs as artists, creative entrepreneurs and community builders.

Suburban Creativity: An Historical Perspective

The fact that women have been working creatively while living in the suburbs is not a recent phenomenon. Arguing for a broadened definition of creativity, Johnson points out that with rapid suburbanization from the early twentieth century, the expectations of the modern 'housewife' demanded high levels of creative competence: to cook creatively, manage the household, make and repair clothes, oversee the vegetable garden and fruit trees, build the local community, and be an attractive wife and capable mother (2012: 221). The significant point here for Johnson is not simply the resourcefulness demonstrated by women in the suburbs at this time, but also 'the creativity involved in being a housewife […]: it was immense: often invisible […] undervalued and roundly satirized within the Australian patriarchal cultural economy' (*ibid*.).

We do not have to look far for the many examples of this oversight and satirical representation referred to earlier. Nor do we have to look far to discover women participating in creative production that extends beyond their role as housewives and mothers. Historical

accounts show that from the period of white settlement, women have been prominent in modern Australian cultural life, as artists, arts patrons and creative community builders. In the early twentieth century, examples of women's artistic contribution are evident in Australia's two most populous cities, Melbourne and Sydney. In 1934 in the north-east Melbourne suburb of Eltham, Lillian Jorgensen helped establish the Montsalvat artists' community with her husband Justus Jorgensen. Montsalvat began as a cluster of mud brick studios for artists, potters and sculptors and developed into a vibrant community where ideas and philosophy were debated around the Jorgensen dinner table and at lectures and discussion groups (Mitchell 2005).

The artistic community known as the Heide Circle was established during the same time, on a former dairy farm in the suburb of Bulleen, Melbourne. Here, Sunday and John Reed's roles as arts patrons were instrumental to the success of artists such as Joy Hester, Sidney Nolan and Albert Tucker. Their home provided accommodation and a nurturing environment for emerging artists such as Lina Bryan and Ada Plant during its heyday in the 1940s (Mitchell 2005).

In Sydney's Castlecrag, a suburb on Middle Harbour, Phylis Hilder played a prominent role in the artistic and community life of Castlecrag and the wider Sydney region (http://www.griffinsociety.org). Castlecrag became known for its artistic community after the architect Walter Burley Griffin and his wife Marion settled there in 1925. The Griffins were strong advocates for the built environment to be in sympathy with the natural environment. Together they promoted the value of social and community life through the establishment of local social and cultural activity, such as music and theatrical groups. Castlecrag became known for its vital community during the 1920s and 30s where the arts, politics, the environment, and spirituality were at the forefront of activity and discussion. Marion Griffin had a keen interest in the arts and contributed to the establishment of the Haven Scenic

Amphitheatre where plays and festivals were held. Music and other groups were also established during this period.

Another feature of early suburban life in Australia from its beginnings as a new colony was the oft-overlooked School of Arts movement and Mechanics Institutes. Established in the early nineteenth century and scattered throughout suburbs such as Granville, Bondi, Richmond and Balmain in Sydney, they provided opportunities for women to engage in creative and intellectual activity. Originally established for the promotion of moral and intellectual improvement for the working class (principally men) in 1833, the movement later broadened its scope and membership became more inclusive. Debating clubs, public lectures and lending libraries were the officially sanctioned activities, but other programs developed. The well-known Sydney theatre group, the Richmond Players, began in the School of Arts in 1952 and continue to perform today as the oldest continuously operating amateur theatre society in New South Wales. The Hawkesbury Valley Lapidary Club has maintained a workshop and exhibition facility in the school since the 1960s (Rozzoli 2002).

The first three female members of the School of Arts were admitted in August 1833, just months after the School's establishment. They were all married to men who were prominent at the School. Although membership was predominantly male until 1950, women's names start appearing in class rolls in the 1860s. In 1864 the Ladies' Drawing Class was the first class exclusively for women and, a separate Ladies' Reading Room was created around this time in the original building (Elzey 2002). Ellen Elzey's research into women in the School of Arts movement identifies a variety of roles women occupied. By the early twentieth century, women such as Adela Pankhurst were giving lectures, and others – most notably the author Miles Franklin – were commenting on them (*ibid*.). Women were also appointed to the Board of Management. The School of Arts demise began after the 1950s, due in part to the growth of local municipal councils and libraries, whose funding mandate

was similar to the School of Arts. The establishment of formal adult education programs and the uptake of movie theatres for recreational pastimes are also seen as contributing factors in their decline. Buildings were absorbed into Council portfolios and frequently demolished or sold off.

Although it has been the project of feminist scholars to recoup the overlooked history of women's cultural, social and working lives, much remains to be understood about women's contribution to creative production. This is something of a hidden story because of the unique circumstances of both creative labour and of women's history. Historically, the type of creative labour that was sanctioned for women was undertaken by bourgeois women in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. This was expressed in craft activities such embroidery and in piano playing and singing. Creative work such as writing or the visual arts was not encouraged and publically recognised only in rare instances, and sometimes then when work was presented to an audience under a male pseudonym, as in the novels of George Eliot and George Sand in the nineteenth century. Contributing factors such as undertaking creative work, often in isolation, and without professional organisations or public recognition means there is a lack of documentary evidence of women who may well have been productive inside the confines of the home and the suburbs. This is less frequently the case now, due to the changing roles of women, the professionalization of the creative workforce, and the means to account for labour force practices and conditions. It was no surprise, then, that the *Creative Suburbia* research project found many women running their own creative practices or businesses, and who lived and worked in the suburbs.

Creative Women Workers in the Suburbs

Women are well represented in the contemporary suburban creative workforce. In our *Creative Suburbia* study, women form 42% of the creative workforce among people

interviewed across six large outer suburbs, three in Brisbane and three in Melbourne. The Australian Research Council-funded project investigated the experiences of creative industries workers living and working in outer-suburban localities and their relationship to place and work. One reason for undertaking a close analysis of particular suburbs was to challenge the assumption that suburbs are 'generic in character […] they all look the same, from city to city, and nation to nation' (Harris and Larkham 1999: 2). We were also interested in how people in creative industries and occupations who live and work in outer suburbs develop business and personal networks, given that density of links is often postulated as a reason why creative industries workers cluster in particular inner-urban locations.

Interviews were conducted with 140 creative workers who worked across a wide range of creative industries, which tended to fall into two distinct groups: what we termed 'commercial creatives' and 'artisans'. The commercial creatives typically owned or worked in a small to medium enterprise (SME) in design-related fields such as graphic design, architecture, fashion, and web design. The artisans pursued traditional arts-based work and included visual artists, writers, musicians, and sculptors. We only interviewed creative workers who were able to support themselves primarily from their creative work: that is, the participants were not weekend hobbyists.

The six outer suburbs were all located on the urban fringe, within 40 kilometres of the city centre and accessible by public transport with rail lines or buses. Both sets of suburbs in Melbourne and Brisbane shared geographic and demographic similarities: two were attractive bayside suburbs with a diverse socio-economic mix and pre-existing cultural communities with informal arts organisations and local cultural centres. Two were master-planned communities and two were middle-ring suburbs, which were less distinctive. The logic for selecting master-planned communities was to see to what extent planning may have either inhibited or promoted creative activity.

Interviews were of approximately 45 minutes duration and comprised a series of open-ended questions that asked people about their relationship between work and their suburban locality. Questions addressing the appeal of the suburbs, and what informed the decision to live there teased out larger issues related to people's work. We undertook ethnographic research in the localities by attending festivals and local cultural events, giving an insight into the types of creative and cultural networks and levels of support. The research contributes to a nuanced understanding of a reconfigured Australian suburbia, aside from the clichés and stereotypes which have long been associated with suburban life (Anderson *et al*. 2006).

While the study was focused on the reasons for and experience of working and living in the suburbs, and did not canvas gender-specific questions, it is clear from the data that having a home-based office or working close to home was seen as a distinct advantage for many of the women interviewed. This reflects a significant trend in Australia – that the dramatic growth in home-based businesses is based on those operated mainly by women. National research into women-owned businesses finds that although this growth is widespread internationally, it is an area that has tended to be overlooked (AWCCI 2011). Fifty-one per cent of women with dependent children primarily run a business from home, as opposed to 45% of those without dependent children. Although the growth of women-owned businesses is widespread and international, women in entrepreneurship roles have been largely neglected, both in society in general and in the social sciences (*ibid*.). In the past 10 years the number of women 'own account workers' has gone up by 24.6%, while for men it is only up 1%. The number of men running a business has dropped by 3.7% over the past five years, while the number of women running a business has grown by 8.9% (*ibid*.).

Work, Mobility and Technology

Technology's capacity to bridge spatial boundaries, and in certain circumstances replace face-to-face interaction, is evident in the range and use of communication technologies available. Indeed, technological innovation is a central contributor in the liberation of place-bound work, providing people with the opportunity to work remotely and from home. The significant rise in women's home-run businesses is assisted by internet communication technologies such as email, file sharing applications and communication technologies such as Skype. The use of internet technologies is ubiquitous in everyday life and it is no surprise that women in the study who were owners of home-based design SMEs used technology to conduct many aspects of business online and to maintain contact with clients. Initial meetings are conducted face-to-face when ideas and concepts are pitched and once a relationship is established, a significant component of work is conducted online.

But technology has not rendered place totally redundant. For women who ran small businesses, a high value is placed on face-to-face networking for the acquisition of potential clients. This was one area where living and working in an outer suburb was regarded as a disadvantage, with women reporting that it was necessary to attend city-based events for client networking.

Results

While figures for female home businesses may carry the inherent assumption that women working from home are combining work and family responsibilities, it was not frequently the case for women in the *Creative Suburbia* project. Women who were interviewed worked across a wide range of creative industries, from singer/songwriters, sculptors and painters to those who ran or worked in an SME as web designers, architects, and in advertising. Some women worked from home and some had small local commutes to their workplaces.

There were no significant differences between women and men regarding their decision to work and live in the suburbs; both expressed lifestyle concerns, and the processes associated with creativity, as paramount. To generate creative endeavour, participants identified two important concepts as necessary: space and time. Living in an outer suburb provided both space (larger blocks of land and open environment) and time (slower pace of life with a short or no commute) to think and create. Raising a family was a consideration in many people's choices but equally there were people without children or who were at different stages of the life cycle. Eighty per cent of those interviewed did not commute a significant distance from home to their place of work and 81% of people were satisfied with their place of work. Slightly fewer (68%) were satisfied with where they lived. Among those who would prefer to live or work elsewhere, equal numbers identified a rural residence and an inner-city location.

For women in the *Creative Suburbia* project, there were other draw-cards to working in the suburbs as well as the benefit of working from home or close to home to enable the easier combination of work and family responsibilities. The primary appeal of a suburban location included attractions associated with environmental amenity, lower costs of living and less resultant stress, more 'headspace' in which to engage in creative activities, and fewer pressures to conform to peer norms and expectations. For many people, being removed from the distractions of the city and the slower pace of life provided the time to think creatively. People frequently referred to the 'distractions' of urban life, which transmuted into internal pressures, impacting on their capacity for creative thought and action. Urban theorist Georg Simmel, writing about the mid twentieth-century urban experience, describes a distinct psychological, affective and embodied response that people have to urban stimuli (1950). For Simmel (see also Sennett 1994), the intensity and rapidity of stimuli in the city produces a detached and blasé subjectivity which results in indifference, a strategy for warding off the intensity of information, events, and relationships concentrated in dense urban environments**.**

Writing prior to internet and other technological developments, this experience is arguably even more intense today. Such a psychological response challenges the idea that spatial proximity and interaction with other creative people produces innovation and dynamism. While there are clearly many creative workers who do thrive in this type of dense urban environment, for many people in our study the busy-ness of urban life mitigated against creative thought and production. The perceived tranquility and calm of their suburb and subsequent time for reflection, was valued for their work. As one female artist put it: 'I'd get too distracted if I lived in the city and wouldn't get much work done'.

Another unexpected finding contradicts the stereotypical thinking that people who live in the suburbs tend to be conformist and unadventurous. Several participants who had formerly lived in inner-city areas felt that their suburban locations enabled them greater artistic freedom and tolerance than they had experienced when living and exhibiting or selling their work in inner-city locations. Conformity was articulated as the pressure to adhere to a somewhat inflexible inner-city style. For some participants this meant on a superficial level: how one looked and dressed. On the creative level, there was a perception that their inner-city markets or audiences were less open to experimentation and difference and that in order to succeed in the urban markets, one had to adapt one's style and work to the style of the moment. Several people commented that when moving from the inner city to the outer suburbs they were surprised to find locals in the area receptive to innovation and difference. A fashion designer with a shop in one Brisbane suburb remarked that she was surprised by how ready the area was for something different and that this encouraged her to be more creative.

Our analysis of the suburban creative workforce did not set out to identify gendered differentials in either choice of location or creative enterprise or activities. However, it is clear from the interview data that had there been significant differences, this would have

arisen during the conversations with researchers. Rather, the results are representative of the diminishing distinction between male and female work-related roles, perhaps more representative for those in the creative workforce in particular.

An example of where traditional gender roles and creative endeavour meet in the suburbs, however, was in the case of Samantha, a Brisbane participant and social entrepreneur. Samantha's social enterprise *Biddy Bags* draws on traditional female craft skills and women's role as community builders to develop a highly successful enterprise for and run by women in Brisbane's outer northern peninsular. Motivated by the problem of social isolation among elderly women and under-employment for young women in her outer suburb, Samantha created *Biddy Bags* (www.biddybags.com.au), which brings together elderly women with craft skills and young women with design skills. The young designers create designs for bags, tea cosies, and iPhone covers, and the older women make the products by crocheting and sewing the items. Each product comes with a story about the women who created the products.

Biddy Bags clutch bag

iPhone cover

The products are promoted and sold online and the social enterprise garnered national coverage and has been promoted by well-known young singer-songwriter, Sarah Blasko. The funds from the profits are given to the women who design and make the items, with a small percentage to the social entrepreneur herself.

In one sense this social enterprise is a commercial adaptation of work that women have traditionally performed, unpaid, in their communities for generations. It is also the work of community building, strengthening locality-based social networks. One of the innovations of the *Biddy Bags* project is the use of online technologies to help sell the products.

Conclusion

Clearly much has changed in the structure and living conditions of cities throughout the latter part of the twentieth century and into the twenty-first century. Alongside this, social change beginning in the late 1970s has resulted in a substantial increase in women's participation in the workforce. Once confined to the domestic sphere, women's wholescale entry into the workforce has contributed to the reconfiguring of the Australian suburbs.

The *Creative Suburbia* project in Brisbane and Melbourne found many female creative workers living and working in suburbs, across a range of creative industries sectors. Such evidence shatters a few shibboleths: about the suburbs as passive places for family life, about women's activity in the suburbs and about women as active participants in entrepreneurial roles. Technology is a key factor in the rise of home businesses, enabling creation collaboration and marketing, and the combination of family and work for many women. The creative industries are growing at a rate well above the Australian workforce in general and many sectors are highly dependent on technology (Cunningham 2013). The opportunities offered by changes to the creative workforce, technology and women's roles will continue to reshape our cities and suburbs well into the twenty-first century.

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